

Gate: American Expedition

by Deadlined

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Summary: The Gate opens in the busy streets of Los Angeles. In response to the violent invasion, the United States sends an expeditionary force beyond the portal to secure the safety of her citizens.

1. Sloppy Joe Hill

Chaos.

Men ran rampant through the streets of Los Angeles, stabbing and cutting through swathes of civilians. Men in ancient-looking armor, more suited for medieval times with weapons to match, were streaming through a gigantic marble arch that had appeared in the middle of a busy road.

Resistance was slight and ineffective. Although many had firearms, the civilians were caught off-guard and too disorganized to hold off any enemy offensive. Families were forced to flee, a handgun or rifle only able to hold them at bay long enough to escape the immediate danger.

Fantastical creatures had appeared, flying through the sky carrying daredevil riders with long spears or bows. Dragons, gryphons, and pegasuses harassed and corralled the panicked citizens into dead ends where the infantry could have their way.

That was, until the National Guard showed up.

Ryan Warren steered through the crowded street, making sure not to hit anything. Few people were in the street, having fled or found decent enough hiding places. Like him, anyone with a car had attempted to flee already. Major highways were becoming blocked up but with the omnidirectional movement they were steady moving. Many others, like himself, had opted for smaller roads, avoiding much of the traffic.

His wife next to him, his young son in the back, he figured things were going rather smoothly.

Driving down onto a larger road, it was then that he saw the presence of desert-colored trucks with large machine guns mounted to the tops heading in the opposite direction, towards the center of the city. The column was stopped, one man outside emptying fuel cans into the truck and the others waiting on edge in the vehicle itself.

He pulled over into the shoulder of the road, slowing to a stop, and rolled down his window.

"Hey!" he said, "You guys need help?"

The fueler, with the patch of a National Guard unit, waved him off. "No, sir, just get your family to safety."

"I'm National Guard," Ryan said. He reached into his pocket and produced his wallet, showing his military-issued ID to him.

"Where's your unit?" the guardsman asked. Next to him, the vehicle commander opened his door to join in on the conversation.

"Auburn," Ryan answered.

"Shit," the vehicle commander said. "Well, it's not like we have extra equipment."

"I'm sure there's something I can help with," Ryan argued. He didn't look to her, but he could feel the daggers his wife was stabbing into the back of his head with her eyes. "You can always use an extra man."

The vehicle commander leaned into the Humvee and grabbed for the radio handset, explaining the situation to the platoon leader. After a few seconds, he turned back to Ryan.

"Alright," he said. "Just let me see your card."

Butterflies in his stomach, Ryan stepped out of his car and handed the ID to the guardsman.

"Ryan!" he heard from behind him. "What the hell are you doing!?"

He turned to his wife. "Honey, I'm going to join up with my unit anyway. I might as well get started now when they really need people. Just take Michael to the house."

His wife quieted down and wiped the wetness from her eyes. She did marry into the military after all, and she had already accepted that fact. She got out of the car and walked around to the front, giving her husband a tight hug, which he returned.

"Alright," she said. "I know what I got into. Just be safe, ok?"

"Ok," he said. "Just get a few hours away, alright?"

She nodded her head, gave him a quick peck on his cheek, and climbed into the driver seat of the car. She gave him a final wave as she

merged back into traffic and disappeared into the mass of vehicles. The last thing Ryan saw was the face of his son looking out the rear window at him.

"Why are you down here if you're based in Auburn anyway?" one of the guardsmen asked.

"Visiting family," Ryan answered. "They took off in their own car."

The vehicle commander reached into the shoulder pocket of his jacket. "Here, before the .50 blows your ears out," he said, throwing him a small box of disposable foam earplugs.

Ryan nodded his thanks and climbed into the Humvee which, having only four inside, had an extra seat in the rear.

Ryan finally began to recognize some sense of a perimeter in the counter-offensive. The enemy were on the run now, over the bodies of their dead strewn across the streets of the city. Unrelenting fire from the guardsmen and .50 caliber machine guns cut down the isolated and demoralized enemy in seconds, although to Ryan it felt like minutes.

To him, the movement of the guardsmen throughout the city did not seem to have any forethought, simply moving street to street and waiting for instructions. It was effective, however, and easily cut down the resistance they faced. Even the mounted riders were little trouble. Enough small arms fire took most down easily enough, and the force of the .50 BMG was often sufficient to tear the creature and riders into pieces.

There simply weren't enough targets for all them men with rifles. One enemy soldier would try to dash across a street and six or seven rifles immediately snapped to him, two or three hitting center mass with the first couple of shots.

He had delegated himself to the wounded civilians at his feet. He, with the help of another couple of guardsmen, was feeling through the casualties, bringing the wounded and dying to an FMTV laden with medical supplies, surrounded by overworked yet diligent medics and doctors. He and his partner picked up a young woman who had a large slice through her thigh and a wound in her abdomen. He kicked away the gauntlet-clad hand of another enemy soldier that reached for his leg. It wasn't that he was ignoring the wounded of the enemy, but his own countrymen had priority to him.

The gunfire had stopped by then. After a stone-faced medic had settled down the woman he was carrying, he slumped down on an overturned trash can. After slowing down, he could hardly breathe. He wasn't thinking it at the time but he had been hauling bodies for hours for hundreds of combined yards. He wiped sweat from his forehead with his shirt, which he noticed was covered in blood. Which of the dozens of wounded he recovered it belonged to he couldn't tell; all he was certain of was that it wasn't his. He let his eyes close, resting his face in his hands. The fingers of sleep tugged at his mind. For once in his military career, he didn't resist.

He was woken with a tap on his shoulder. He blinked his eyes open and itched his hair with his hands, waking himself up. He looked to the

source of the disturbance to find a young guardsman there, too young it looked to even be shaving. His uniform was clean save for dirty stains around the knees and his boots, and most prevalently, a large blood splattering across his FLC which spread up across his neck and onto the side of his face to his left ear.

"Hey, you alright, sir?" the boy asked.

Ryan noticed the patch on his left shoulder, a diagonally two-tone near rectangle with a black lightning bolt superimposed over it.

"It's Sergeant," he said. "What company are you?"

"Charlie One Seventy-Nine, Sergeant," the guardsman answered.

Ryan waved him off. "Quit with the 'Sergeant' shit," he said. "Unless you want me to call you Private every sentence, too,"

"I'm good."

"Alright. I'm also in Charlie. I need to talk with the CO."

"Wait, Sergeant Warren?"

"Yeah," Ryan said, nodding.

"First platoon, right? I heard a couple guys from First complaining about a Sergeant who wanted to 'go play Rambo' or some shit."

"Ok," Ryan said, "well can you get me to the captain?"

"Yeah," the guardsman answered. "Yeah, I can do that."

* * *

><p>Ryan Warren stood at attention for the man who, in his humble opinion, was the epitome of not giving worth a damn. The blousing bands alone were not a sign, but combined with his hands being constantly in his pockets, the slight shadow he had no matter the time of day, and the almost messy haircut he sported, it was obvious to anyone. He was a good troop leader, Ryan felt, but not a stickler for anything he did not deem important.<p>

"Sir," he said, standing at attention. Around the command room, before that utterly abandoned, before that the food court of a mini-mall, buzzed the headquarters platoon of the unit, ferrying papers back and forth and setting work spaces for the officers and senior sergeants.

"Sergeant."

"Sir?"

"Sergeant."

"Uh, I got here," Ryan said.

"Warren, right?"

Ryan nodded his head.

"Alright. Your gear's in the corner over there. We snipped your lock, by the way," he said.

Ryan replied with a "yes, sir" under his breath and jogged to the pile of gray-blue camouflaged gear. Everything he needed was there, albeit with no changes of clothing in case something was ruined. He grabbed the pile and made for the nearest restroom and quickly donned his uniform. He took the camelback and filled it with one of the restroom's faucets before clipping it to the back of his vest. He donned the vest and stepped back into the makeshift command center.

He quickly found his platoon leader. "Sir? Was my rifle brought?"

The lieutenant nodded and pointed out one of the doors. "Yeah. On an LMTV. We grabbed all the rifles in the arms room."

"Roger," Ryan replied before heading out the door. The private guarding the truck climbed inside the back and produced a rifle matching the serial number Ryan gave to him. Ryan double checked it and slung it over his shoulder. The private turned back into the vehicle and found a seat.

Ryan turned around and headed back to his platoon leader. The officer, a short man with a clean shave and well-fitting uniform, was in a discussion with several NCOs, each writing down notes on small pads of paper. Ryan changed his direction towards the group of guardsmen nearby, who were standing or sitting on whatever they could find. Each looked exhausted, both physically and mentally, and didn't react to his approach. He found his squad filling their canteens and camelbacks from an orange water cooler.

"Hey," he said, "did I miss anything?"

* * *

><p>The next day

* * *

><p>They were a magnificent sight, yet Ryan had to hold in the burning, sickening sensation in his gut. Since the incident, the Gate (as it had been called) had been quiet, albeit under heavy guard by his battalion. Lined up outside were the men of some Marine unit, their LAV-25s in neat rows, ready to head into the gate. Behind them, the Amphibious Assault Vehicles carrying standard infantry squads, and behind them, the men of the 101st Airborne Division in high-backed Humvees. Behind them, staged on HEMTTs, were attack and transportation helicopters, although not ready in the convoy.<p>

Around them in hundreds, reporters from various networks, both local and national, both American and foreign. In the thousands were mourning locals, cheering on the troops as if this expedition could bring back the dead and heal the wounded.

He could barely stand to look at them, however. It was his home that

was attacked, his family endangered. Yet he and his unit were being shafted to home-side sentry duty. His stomach churned.

* * *

><p>The area beyond the Gate was black. It was not in the sense of the absence of light, for Sergeant Allen of Alpha Company, First Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion of the First Marine Division, could see his fellow vehicles clear as day. It was the ground itself that was blacker than a new moon's night. The sky, if it could be called that, as well was an identical color. To call it a shade would give it too much credit, Allen thought. There was no discernment between the sky and the ground. Simple emptiness that the battalion seemed to glide on upon a common geometric plane. He was almost fearful of exiting his LAV-25 for fear of falling through whatever surface bore the armored force.<p>

It was like how photos showed the Moon to be. Difference between light and dark was immediate. As the column rode farther away from the abyss' end of the Gate, harsh shadows were born by the vehicles as those behind them blocked the Gate's light. He was tempted to call for headlights to be turned on, but a quick view through the thermal sights of his vehicle produced favorable results.

"Platoon, pick up a line, 100 meter interval," he heard over the radio.

"Driver, did you hear that?" he asked over the intercom.

"No, what?" came the reply.

Allen checked the thermals to see the positioning of the other vehicles. "Go to the right of the guys in front of us. We're hitting a 100 meter interval."

"Roger," his driver answered.

The vehicle turned slightly, gradually increasing the interval as the platoon covered ground. Eventually, Allen was forced to use his thermal sight to gauge his position among the formation. It wasn't until twenty minutes later that he heard a "halt" on the net. He called his driver to a stop and began scanning.

"Unknown contact, dead ahead," he heard. "Tons of 'em. I think I see the opposite Gate, too."

"I see them too," Allen said, trying his best to discern their forms. He couldn't see any weapons on them, however, but then again he was using a rather crude thermal sight at long range. The nature of the environment helped, however, as any source of heat was a stark contrast from the ground surface. "Permission to engage?"

"Hold on," the lieutenant replied. After minute the comm unit crackled. "I see weapons and those big-ass dragon things. Hit the big stuff first. Clear to engage."

Allen let out a slight smile. "Fuck 'em up."

The 25mm autocannon on his vehicle opened up, soon followed by that of the other vehicles. He watched the results on his sight.

Projectiles ripped into the far-off bodies, sending limbs and showers of blood everywhere. The enemy soldiers were packed together, allowing even small bursts to kill or wound large groups of men. Several of the beasts tried to take flight, but they were similarly vulnerable and were quickly cut down with their infantry counterparts.

The platoon leader came on the net. "Cease fire, cease fire."

Allen's gunner did so, letting the 25mm cannon slowly cool itself off as wisps of water vapor and smoke rose from the exposed barrel.

"Bravo, hold back. Alpha is going in. We'll follow," the platoon leader said after a minute's hesitation. "An infantry platoon will go in after that."

* * *

><p>The smell of fresh air slowly wafted through the open hatch above Sergeant Allen. He reached for the edges and slowly pulled himself up. It was night out, and the headlights of the LAV-25s cast softer shadows around him, signifying a definite change of environment from the desolate Gate. To him, the environment looked no different from the woodland he was used to. The area around the Gate structure was tall, unkempt grass, while a hundred yards or so down hill lay a sparse forest.<p>

Something was not right.

He got back down into the turret and looked through the thermal sights. His heart nearly skipped a beat. Throughout the grass was dozens, perhaps hundreds, of heat signatures lying in wait, starting roughly half way to the woods. He keyed the mic on his helmet. "Sir, check your thermals! I've got guys in the grass!"

"Shit," the lieutenant replied. "Platoon, get on line. Gunners, don't fire yet."

Allen relayed the orders to his crew and the vehicle slowly moved into place. They were rather well-hidden, as Allen could not spot them through the standard sights, and even the thermals were disrupted by the cold grass obscuring their forms.

Within the treeline, Allen saw a black, cold signature form several meters from the ground. As he zoomed in, trying to discern exactly what it was, it blasted away, heading straight for one of the vehicles of his section.

Allen felt it rather than heard it, the reverberations drumming through his vehicles hull, kicking up dust in a similar manner as an Abrams' cannon. He looked out through the periscope just as the struck vehicle's forward wheels regained contact with the ground. One of the forward wheels fell away from the LAV-25, its scorched form slumping to one side from the loss of support.

"Gunner, open up!" he screamed, trying to make sense of the situation. "I don't care at what; just fuck something up!"

That was no missile. If he were in Afghanistan, he wouldn't be so shocked. The Taliban had hundreds if not thousands of cheap rockets and missiles left over from previous wars. Them, he could deal with. Allen just had no idea how a supposedly medieval army produced a weapon with destructiveness similar to that of a guided missile. He kept watching through the periscope as the scouts exited through the rear ramp, rifles up as they sought cover. Thankfully, there was no fire, and all of the Marines appeared uninjured. The turret began to fire, giving Allen the impression that damage was limited to the front of the vehicle only.

Suddenly another vehicle was struck similarly on the side, and this time the turret was disabled. Allen looked to the treeline to where he saw the cold, floating ball earlier.

"Gunner," he called, bringing the mic closer to his mouth for clarity. "Treeline. Look through the thermals for a black floating ball. I think that's what's killing us."

By then, most of the enemy infantry throughout the grass had either retreated or been grievously injured by the 25mm autocannons, and infantry-carrying AAVs had begun emerging from the Gate. They began to form a semi-circular perimeter around the front of the Gate, pushing out past the LAV-25s. Infantry then emerged from the vehicles, rifles up and downrange, and began to form a perimeter themselves. A couple mortar teams began securing their tubes, and machine gunners were in the process of finding open sightlines where their weapons would be most effective.

* * *

><p>The AAVs, large boat-shaped tracked vehicles each carrying a squad of riflemen, began to push towards the perimeter, firing their Mk. 19 automatic grenade launchers as they went. The enemy fire finally began to die down, and the riflemen pushed forwards out of cover. Captain Pelsc, commander of Alpha Company, First Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, moved forwards with his dismounted men, rifle in hand. His men took up positions in the tall grass, firing at any movement in the now-sparse trees beyond. The rest of the AAVs belonging to Bravo Company, First Battalion, First Marines crept up to his men's outer perimeter and the troops inside dismounted.<p>

The troops cautiously moved towards the edge of the forest. This was perhaps the most dangerous part of the assault, he thought, as the large weaponry utilized by their vehicles could not be used for fear of friendly fire.

What happened next came to no surprise to him. Swordsmen popped from the ground, from behind trees, from the few treetops, and even from behind the bodies of fallen monsters. The Marines were outnumbered and outskilled, but made up for it in ferocity and technology, shooting and bayoneting their way through back to the perimeter. In the dark, Pelc's men couldn't fire accurately and maintained fire discipline. The surviving enemy were nearly overwhelming, however, and men not engaged with the forward riflemen began to desperately charge up towards his line.

"Bayonets!" Pelsc yelled, attaching his own, before leveling the rifle and getting a few shots off before the first man reached him.

He parried the sword blow with his bayonet, swinging to smack the man in the jaw with his stock. He shot the man in the chest and moved to the next target. Men around him preformed similar, holding off the quickly dwindling push.

It was obvious to him the battle was over. A last act of defiance against impossible odds, swordsmen charged bravely yet were cut down by rifle fire. Although they stood a fair chance against the Marines in terms of close quarter skills, Pelsc's men were able to increase distance enough to use their rifles. Eventually, enemy manpower ran out, and after the last rounds were fired, a small breeze blew through the hill. The scent hit him hard. He hadn't noticed it before, but the smell of dead men and gunpowder was nearly too much. He held his composure for his men, however, and began directing medical details to gather the wounded and count the dead.

The sun was beginning to show beyond the horizon. He could make out a great forest in the distance, vast mountain ranges flanking on either side. It was a picturesque sight yet he couldn't enjoy it. He took off his helmet, wiping the sweat from his forehead and eyes with his sleeve, before slicking his hair back and replacing his helmet.

Something in the distance caught his eye. He thought it was a trick of the light at first, but reached into a pouch for binoculars.

His stomach sank.

Torches. Hundreds of them. Tall, building-sized monsters. Ogres and dragon mounts. Catapults and cavalry.

The sight kept his attention for several minutes as he studied every detail, trying to come up with a plan for his exhausted men to carry out in a desperate, ditched defense. It wasn't until a tap on his shoulder that he diverted his attention. It was his executive officer, Lieutenant Sheere.

"Sir, the tanks are through."

2. The Village

A/N

Faust: Thanks for the in-depth review. I see your point, but I jumped right into it to give a sense of urgency for the characters (OH SHIT gotta go move, no time to prepare), and honestly I don't have the patience/endurance to go write up pure characterization. I do what I can to give a sense of personality within scenes, but when I start writing things outside of plot advancement my writing just grinds to a halt and the chapter takes months to write. Oh, and especially with the snippet at the end, we're going to see "how another branch operates on a more in depth level."

Mcrae: While true, a large part of this is that America is still vulnerable after 15 years of war. We keep terrorists off our back after spending thousands of lives and trillions of dollars, and then some assholes come in and massacre civilians for the hell of it. As well as that even with 9/11, this was an attack by a 'conventional' force in a (failed) attempt to take and hold ground which the public

has not experienced for over 100 years.

* * *

><p>"Sloppy Joe Hill"

"Jesus," Lieutenant Davis muttered under his breath. The effect of the tanks upon the enemy was devastating. There were few discernible bodies that were in a recognizable shape. They were shredded. There was more blackish-red than there was green grass. Limbs and shredded torsos littered the plains around the hill. The force sent to attack his unit was ineffective: small, poorly led, and hastily pieced together and planned. It was a mad rush to the hill before the tanks had found their sightlines. Canister rounds of over a thousand tungsten balls each were fired one after another, killing or crippling dozens of men in instants. Those not killed by the canisters were killed by the 81mm mortars.

Half of an army lay dead before Davis. The scale of death and suffering was incomprehensible to him. The casualties of the beaches of Iwo Jima were wrought in minutes.

Unfortunately, that meant that the tanks were out of ammunition. Or nearly, he assumed. He hadn't seen any logistical vehicles bringing honeycombs of tank rounds. Their defense against another attack relied on the machine guns and mortars around him. Perhaps the tanks still had a few explosive rounds that could be used against those large monsters. He hoped.

The sound of Sergeant Allen brought his attention back. "Hey, sir, look. More."

Davis squinted his eyes, looking out towards the western horizon. Another army. Another _enemy_ army. Although logpack had brought more munitions for his vehicles and infantry, to include mortars and machine guns, this did not include the tanks. The tanks were in the forefront of their perimeter. Should friendly fire occur, a 7.62mm round would do little against its armor. A canister round, or its casing, would have a much larger impact against a grounded infantry squad to say the least. The 360 degree perimeter was also advanced much farther than it had been last night, giving plenty of room for maneuver. Should retreat be necessary for the tanks, there was little fear of the infantry earning their tanker nickname of "crunchy".

As the enemy column drew closer, they dispersed into battle formations. They maintained marching order, however, moving in neat blocks that reminded him of the Romans of old. In fact, the individual swordsmen themselves reminded him. The ones he fought the previous night had appeared to be Roman soldiers with a medieval twist, designed by some random civilian with no familiarity with the culture he was presenting or its history.

The enemy army squared up, but did not move towards his position. As he looked closer, they seemed to be at odds with his previous observation. "They don't look like the first guys did," Davis said. Allen looked over at his soldier and saw him peering through a set of binoculars.

Allen nudged him on the shoulder, motioning for permission to use them. Davis handed him the optics. As Allen looked through, he

noticed the lack of uniformity between the formations. Some formations, he noticed, hardly had uniformity even among themselves. "Yeah," he agreed. "Vassals? Or Auxiliaries or some shit."

No later than he said that did a small group head forwards of the army. He watched them try to avoid the blood, gore, and bodies, but it soon proved impossible. The liberal use of canister rounds had ensured that. Through the binoculars, it looked like a muddy field after a rainstorm. The ground, softened by the blood and impact of munitions, had sucked in the hooves of the horses and made their trot slow and awkward.

As he adjusted his sight, he noticed a humvee leave the perimeter, slowly making its way to the horsemen. Although the wheels occasionally slipped or lost traction, it had a noticeably easier time than the horses.

* * *

><p>Captain Pelc eyed the horsemen with suspicion from his passenger seat in the humvee. They were obviously the enemy general and his staff, or at least representatives. "Keep that fifty on them," he ordered. Before exiting the vehicle, he pulled back on the bolt of his rifle slightly, ensuring a round was chambered. He snapped closed the dust cover and stepped out. The two in the rear passenger seats followed, keeping their weapons at the low ready.<p>

"What are they saying?" one of his Marines asked. Pelc stayed silent and relaxed his posture, not trying to aggravate the horsemen. He kept both hands on his weapon, however.

The horseman in front had an imposing posture, he admitted, clad in thick, red plate armor. A white plume on top his helmet moved in the breeze, and the man looked down the Marine, literally and figuratively, whose boots were muddied and bloodied, pressing down half an inch into the earth.

"Adam Pelc," Pelc said, motioning to his chest. Perhaps names were a good place to start.

The man likewise motioned to himself. "Duran."

Pelc considered it pointless to try and communicate verbally. For now, there was no way past the language barrier. He wasn't going to have a week long session with enemy combatants trying to understand each other. He was here to kill them. Or, at least, keep them off the hill.

Going for a wordless approach, he simply bent over and picked up a shredded arm. He held it out in front of him, in plain view of Duran, and held up his rifle with his other hand. He then pointed to the hill, where his Marines were, and at the ground, where the corpses of hundreds if not thousands of men lay. He then pointed at the horsemen. More specifically, at Duran.

* * *

><p>"Oh shit," Allen muttered under his breath. "Ha, fuckin' Christ that's hilarious."<p>

"Huh?" Davis asked, turning to his lieutenant.

"CO just told King Jackoff he's fucked," he informed. As he kept watching, the horsemen briskly turned around and headed back to their line. Captain Pelc likewise remounted his vehicle, heading back towards the hill. A few minutes later he arrived at the command post. As the commander exited and stepped inside the tent, Allen handed the binoculars back to Davis as the platoon leader went towards the tent himself.

* * *

><p>Night time was beautiful here, Allen thought. No light pollution. No noise pollution. He could clearly see the stars of the alien world. Unfortunately for him, he couldn't. He was inside the turret of his LAV-25, looking through the thermal sights out towards the horizon. The forest was destroyed for hundreds of meters, just jagged tree stumps and fallen trunks to make up the terrain. Luckily the wind was behind him, blowing the stench of the previous day's battle away from him.<p>

The tankers and LAV-25 crews had set up a perimeter around the center of the hill and were manning night watch, one man on each crew being up to monitor the radio and thermals. Throughout the night engines roared as they started up, charging the batteries of the vehicles, before shutting off to save gas. The infantry had dug hasty positions, just deep enough to hide them from view. A squad at a time maintained guard in their sectors. Across the hill, each man was getting around three-hour blocks of sleep.

It was minutes until the end of his shift, eyelids dropping, that he saw a massive signature surface a kilometer out. It stayed in one place, clearly staging itself. Unfortunately for them, that was easily within range of the tanks. Not their deadly canister rounds, but high explosives would ruin their day.

"Hey, Childs! Wake up," he called to the driver. "Start it up."

On his command, the engine started, puffing out black smoke before roaring to life.

Allen turned to the side to make sure he was on the company net. He pressed the button of his Combat Vehicle Crewman helmet in. "Arrow Six, this is Three Two Golf. Enemy spotted, one klick, west. I see two block formations, staging for an attack. Over."

"Three Two Golf this is Arrow Six, copy all. Continue to observe. Over."

"Roger, out," Allen finished. By then the crew was awake, getting out of their sleeping bags or stuffing their field blankets back into assault packs. Though the open hatch above him he heard the whine of tank engines starting and the grumble of other LAVs.

"All stations on this net, this is Professional Six. Do not engage. Inform when the enemy force is within rifle range. Over."

Over the net, Allen heard the commanders of the various elements of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit call off their recognition of the order. At least, the ones that had passed through the Gate by then.

Even without a full amount of tank munitions, two platoons of LAV-25s, a company of AAV-mounted infantry, mortars, and heavy machine guns were a force to be reckoned with.

It took nearly half an hour for the enemy to approach. They were slow and, judging from the shape of thermal signatures, had no torches to guide them. Allen had to give them some credit; they were at least trying to think and not just charging in broad daylight. The two formations had formed a line, with one in reserve, and several diamonds of cavalry on the flanks. Some real Alexander the Great shit, he thought.

As soon as the riflemen made it to 300 meters of the perimeter, however, the call was made over radio, and all hell broke loose. All weapons opened fire. Machine guns and rifles cut down the first ranks. Mortars devastated the next, and the two tanks that had sectors on this area were unleashing fire from their three machine guns each.

The radio crackled to life. "Professional X-Ray, this is One Four Golf. 5 blocks of infantry, 3 blocks cavalry approaching from the trees. Over."

"This is Professional X-Ray, roger. Same plan. Rifle range, then all weapons. Your discretion, over."

"This is One Four Actual. Roger, out."

"So they're not plain retarded," Allen said to his crew. Their sister platoon, managing the opposite sector of them, were dealing with a much larger force. The men his platoon was slaughtering, which had to be at least two thousand men, was merely a diversion. They were attempting a sneak attack, concealed by the destroyed forest. Unluckily for them, thermal imaging existed.

Not that it mattered. The back of the diversion was broken. The assault was stopped in its tracks. One group of swordsmen had managed to make it near the perimeter, before it was virtually disintegrated by a well-aimed canister round.

To Allen, that was the battle. Thousands of men dead in an hour. Save for one, all enemy casualties. The impersonality through the thermal sight and the ease of lazy Z-patterns were surreal to his gunner, Lance Corporal Spieers, who decided that he would rather not try to contemplate the massive loss of life he caused. It was no different, physically, from playing a video game, and he was trying to keep it no different mentally to ease his mind. When there was finally no enemy left to shoot, he leaned back in his seat, rubbing his eyes. "Jesus Christ," he muttered.

Allen leaned back in his seat as well. "You know, in Afghanistan, at least they had a chance," he said. "This is just fucked up."

"Better than us getting killed this time though," Childs countered.

"This isn't a fight, man," Allen said. "It's just kicking a bunch of half retarded babies in the face."

* * *

><p>The next day was a bright one, no clouds in the sky as Lieutenant Davis made his way to the command post from his vehicle. He nodded to a nearby grunt as he passed, the Marine unloading and reloading a magazine out of boredom. He was greeted inside by the scent of freshly brewed coffee and the sight of lower level officers bent over a terrain model. In front of him was Captain Pelc and the other two platoon leaders of the LAV company, First Lieutenant Vaughn and Second Lieutenant Robles.<p>

"Davis, want coffee?" Pelc asked.

"No," Davis declined. "If you have any grounds though. My crew needs it more."

"Right. Ok, they're on the table by the entrance." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "You all know how fucking much I hate these overcomplicated and ritualized op-orders. Here's all the info we have on the area. First, you will be heading north with your platoon to scout and map. Second, west. Third, South, and same deal. If you can make contact with locals, try and get a map, but I want eyes on."

"What about the language barrier, sir?" Vaughn asked.

"Translation books," Pelc answered. "They'll be distributed later. Higher S2 got to play around with prisoners taken in LA. Apparently, their language is just a really distorted Latin, so it was easier than we expected."

Robles's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Really? Shit."

Pelc nodded. "Yeah. Roman-looking armor is starting to make more sense."

"Roger. When's SP?" Davis asked.

"Zero-nine-hundred for you guys. Infantry are already moving out for a battalion-sized perimeter and the tanks are staying at Redcon Two for support. You meet anything heavy, you can call in."

"Sounds good," Davis responded. The three platoon leaders took one of the papers from Pelc before heading back to their vehicles.

* * *

><p>"Nah dude, I'm telling you, I have the smallest dick."

"Bruh, my dick is so small I confuse it with my pubes."

"My dick is inverted man, you don't even know."

"What the fuck are you guys talking about?" Allen asked, popping his hatch to get a better look around the vehicle as he talked.

"Sounds like something a guy with a big dick would say," Spieers said.

"Hey, you know what," Allen said, "I'm going to do something

productive with my life and look out for shit."

Allen took out a pair of binoculars, searching the horizon for items of interest as Spieers and Childs continued their discussion, if one could call it that. There was another large forest to the south, and a lake to the west with a mountain at its side, a stream flowing into the water.

Other than that, untamed grassland. Not even farms. The column was on a faint road; it was long out of use, with no recent signs of use, but at one point it had been used to extensively the previous travelers' rut was still present in the ground. He looked again to the forest when something moving caught his eye. He looked closer but couldn't make it out.

"Spieers," he ordered. "Check out that forest to the north."

On his command, the turret rotated. Once it was near Allen's target he called the gunner to stop and search that area.

"Smoke? The fuck?" Spieers exclaimed, his head poking out of the hatch of the LAV.

"Scorched earth," Allen answered. "Prevents us from utilizing the land with our advance. Sucks for them because we don't need to forage. They're just starving their own people for no reason."

"Fuck, man," Childs said.

As Third Platoon advanced in a dispersed column formation down the road, Lieutenant Davis was studying the English/native translation book. He was writing down quick phrases in a notebook.

"I hope you dismounts are reading that language book," Davis said over his vehicle's intercom, even though he knew there would be no response. Although there was a loudspeaker, there was only a single handset to communicate to the three crewmen.

"Massive heat signature," Brown, his gunner, informed. "Flames behind the trees."

"Where?" Davis asked.

"In the smoke."

"Oh, right. Makes sense." Davis cleared his throat. "Down, take us to that forest. That path at our eleven should go to there. Maybe a village or some shit, I doubt forests here randomly catch fire."

Down complied, leading the four-vehicle convoy through the woods. The path through the trees was brief and open, and Davis soon got a good view of the burnt village as he peered outside of his hatch. He also got a good whiff. The smell was almost overpowering. The smell of burnt bodies was pervasive; even some of the scouts in the crew compartment were complaining of it.

"Platoon coil. TCs and scouts dismount," he said over the net. He grabbed the edges of his hatch and pulled himself up, catching his

knees on top of the edges and pushing himself all the way out. He carefully climbed down, making sure the final jump down was as low as possible. His knees were bad enough already. Before he hopped down, he took off his CVC and tossed it on top of the turret, replacing it with a boonie cap he had inside his cargo pocket.

As his boots hit the ground, a loud crunch was heard, and his heart sank. He already knew that there were going to be little to no survivors, but the sound only reinforced that fact.

"I know it's a moot point, but search for survivors."

It was a moot point, as he said. Building after building was burnt to the ground. All trees in the area were burnt to stumps, and collapsed structures led Davis to believe that they had structures built up in the trees themselves. There were other structures, made out of clay and stones or something, that had mostly survived the fires, that sat in melted lumps around the clearing.

He stepped forwards and heard a squelch. He looked down. What he assumed to be a piece of burnt lumber was a charred torso, his boot embedded into it. As he took a closer look around, it was no different. Bodies were strewn about the ground, their color the same ashy black as the earth. He entered a nearby house. Nothing was in a recognizable form. Embers were still lit in ash piles. The heat slapped him in the face like a solid object, his eyes watering and burning like they were splashed with salt water. He backed out quickly; nothing was there for him.

He looked around at his platoon. The dismounts were having similar experiences. The mood had depressed since the second battle the previous day. His experience went from unstoppable killing machines to powerless wannabe heroes squabbling over the rubble of a city they tried to save.

He rubbed his eyes to calm himself. No point in worrying about the past, and the attack likely happened before they even arrived through the Gate anyway. This was certainly not done by the enemy. Even if they torched the town, fire does not flash-sear everything in sight. He was about to call the dismounts back into their vehicles when he thought he heard a woman's voice.

"Quiet!" he yelled, holding up a hand. He heard it again, a bit louder, and in the native language.

Other dismounts had picked up on it too. "The well!" one of the Marines yelled, pulling out a flashlight and sprinting towards the small stone structure in the middle of the clearing. There were two charred stumps sticking out of the ground, presumably the pulley system for a water bucket.

"Get some rappel gear!" Davis ordered, also running to the well. There, at the bottom, he could see a small, young female face, covered in dirtied blonde hair. "Hurry the fuck up!"

A Marine returned with a couple bundles of rope over his shoulders, with the platoon's two corporals right behind him.

"You know how to make a ranger harness?" Davis asked.

"I got it," Emerson, one of the corporals, answered. "Just set up the ropes."

"No, hold on," Davis said. "Just bring a LAV back here. We'll just tie you up to it and reverse it."

The Marine ran back to his vehicle, climbing up on top and knocking on the driver's hatch. After a second of conversation, he hopped back down. Davis went to a few meters behind the vehicle, motioning to the Marine to signal the driver from the front. Davis backed him up to within fifteen meters of the well and tied one end of the rope to a point on the back of the vehicle.

Emerson tied the rope to the front of his harness, making sure there was little slack in the rope. "Reverse!" he yelled.

Davis turned back to the LAV, signaling for the driver to move back slightly.

After several shouts of "Keep going!" and "Almost!" he finally heard a "Stop!" from the corporal. Finally an "Up!" was heard. Davis signaled for the LAV to advance. The driver was skilled, it seemed, as he kept a slow but steady pace that didn't disrupt the two on the rope.

Emerson, with the help of a corporal, helped the villager out of the well. She was barely conscious and practically dead weight to him. To Davis, she looked incredibly young. No older than twenty or so. And, although he didn't want to seem like he was taking advantage of the situation, she was incredibly beautiful. Objectively speaking, he mentally told himself. He was allowed to make observations.

As her long, blonde, but muddied hair shifted he caught sight of her ears.

"OK so I guess elves exist now," he said half to himself. He stayed back, letting Emerson and the other corporal get to work.

As she was on her back, Emerson setting up a stretcher next to her, she pointed to his dark skin and muttered something. It was faint, Davis caught it and wrote it down, quickly translating it with his book.

"Dark Elf?" He checked back through his book and re-translated. "The fuck?"

The Marines around him stopped what they were doing and stared at him. "Yo, I think elves are racist here," one of the corporals said, and everyone save for the corporals burst into laughter despite their surroundings, despite the frantic and depressed mood of only a few minutes ago. It was a welcome reprieve, however, and a boost for morale despite the horror they witnessed the aftermath of.

Davis let the laughter die down. He thought it best to let the tension relieve itself. After a minute he caught his platoon's attention. "Fuck it. Let's hit the road again. Continue northwest."

After he settled back into his seat, Davis thought for a second. Whatever destroyed this village was likely still around, or would be

back later. Maybe not, but there was a huge risk of it, he felt. He switched the J-Box, the control panel for his CVC, to broadcast on the company net. He wanted to make a call first.

* * *

><p>"Woah, shit, we got buildings here," Down said.<p>

"Good spot, driver," Davis praised. "Gunner, sights on." He pressed the button on his helmet to voice to the platoon. "Platoon line. Buildings ahead, some kind of village."

The four vehicles pulled up, about a hundred meters from each other. Once they reached just outside the main village road, they pulled in towards each other and formed a semicircle facing away from the village. As the gunners set up their sectors of fire, the rear ramp was lowered and the scout dismounts, four to each vehicle, slowly stepped outside as villagers began to crowd around in front of them.

Not too smart of them, thought Davis, but he was happy for the break. He really did not want to deal with a bunch of panicked civilians. "Relax, guys," he said to the dismounts as he exited his own vehicle. The commanders of the other three LAVs did likewise. "We don't need to spook them."

He stepped forwards, drawing their attention. As they stared at him, he pulled out his notebook and began reading. "_Good morning. I am Lieutenant Davis. I am from America_," he said in their language. No need to confuse them with specifying Marines. "_We do not want to fight you. We want information about the land_."

An old man stepped forwards. He held himself regally, despite his diminutive size, and peered at Davis curiously. He said a few words in his language, pointing at Davis and his Marines. Davis began writing it down in his notebook. Fortunately, the man said it slowly, and he was able to get most of it. He referenced his book.

Why are we here, and how can we be trusted? Davis took a few seconds to find translations. Luckily, the first part he already had written down. "_We are here because we were attacked by an army from this land. We are securing this area to protect our citizens. We want to earn your trust. A nearby village was destroyed by flame. We can protect you._"

At this, the man's eye went wide with fear. He began yelling in his language to the villagers, and the followed suite. It was too fast for him to decipher, so he went and grabbed the old man, asking what was happening. He spoke slowly and clearly, and the translation Davis wrote down sent a chill down his back. "Fire dragon. One village is not enough to feed it. It will be back."

Thank God the cavalry had just arrived, he thought.

* * *

><p>Auburn, California

"So, what do you think?"

Sergeant Warren thought for a minute. "I would like to go across the Gate right now. But I joined the Guard instead of active for a reason."

The Staff Sergeant in front of him scratched his chin for a few seconds before continuing.

"You won't need to worry about that. Judging by your combat patch, I know you can see how long Guard deployments can be."

Warren nodded his head. "Yeah."

"For one, this is technically a non-deployable unit. This is going to be a duty station. Six months out there, six back in California."

"Doesn't sound that bad," Warren admitted. Even if it was more constant, his time away from his family was limited to six months at a time. "So how big is this mobilization?"

"Big," the Staff Sergeant answered. "Two brigades are being reflagged from other divisions, and this offer is being made to all local National Guard units."

Warren let it roll around in his head for a moment. For one, he would be back on a tank, which he honestly missed, despite all the bitching he had done on his last overseas deployment. Two, and most importantly, he would replace those damn Marines. "Ok, deal."

The Staff Sergeant reached across the table to shake his hand. As he sat down, Warren leaned over to get a better look at the soldier's unit patch, a circle bearing an hourglass-looking shape. "Welcome to the Seventh Infantry Division."

3. To Kill a Dragon

A/N

Wow, really did not expect to run this to almost 4,000 words, but I just kept adding parts and, well, another couple days of writing. I actually completely forgot to introduce Rory in my first draft... And yes this does go differently from the episode, but I do not have stamina as a writer and I don't want to rewatch the series just to rewrite it. I'm just going off the Wikipedia episode summaries, and if I have to smudge the plot to make it fit to my 6 month old memory of the episode, so be it. It should be entertaining, at the very least.

Faust: Yeah I'm stressing that these guys really do not know what they're doing. This isn't another tour in the sandbox. This isn't an enemy or populace they're used to. In Gate, as far as characterization and plot flow goes, it's kinda shit. Itami's just this super bad-ass who makes princesses and demi-gods fall for him, and generals bend their plans around his whims. So I'm rewriting in parts to a "Well shit, now what?" direction. And honestly, if I was just going to rewrite the anime or manga (or LN for that matter), you could just enjoy the original work. In a lot of fanfics, especially Mass Effect ones, I skip the battle scenes since they're just retellings of missions I've played a dozen times over.

Systemman: Thanks for the timeline. I was honestly too lazy to reread it to figure it out. But now that I'm looking at it, I can't get the plot points how I want them while keeping the timeline vague. But I don't want to go into the Imperial side of things a lot. It's from the US perspective, and we've already all watched/read Gate. No point in it if I can make it work otherwise. So I'm gonna bullshit my way out and say that an auxiliary army was already on its way immediately after he heard of the defeat on the US's side of the Gate.

* * *

><p>"Well, I'm not sure what I was expecting," Davis said to himself. The village elder was directing the organized chaos, directing carts into the street and talking to villagers; he wasn't sure what about, but he guessed it was about what to bring with them. He went after him.<p>

"Stop!" he yelled, running up to the elder. "_We can protect you from the dragon_," he said in the foreign language.

The man responded, but Davis didn't bother translating it. "_Get underground or away from the village. Moving will make you vulnerable_," he continued.

The village elder opened his mouth to speak, but something behind Davis caught his attention. As a large, shapeshifting shadow settled itself on the ground around Davis, he cursed under his breath. "It's right there, isn't it?"

The sprint back to his vehicle was the fastest he had ever felt himself run, seemingly exceeding his hundred meter pace that he ran in PTs, in full kit. "Start it up! START THE FUCKING CAR!"

The other three LAVs of his platoon had begun moving, Bravo section taking aim at the dragon while moving out, while Sergeant Allen's vehicle made a lazy semicircle around Davis's. Bravo section hesitated to open fire without orders, fearing to provoke the beast Davis had assumed, but the dragon let loose its flame regardless. In seconds a building was incinerated, flame splashing like napalm, catching ground and nearby buildings on fire. The LAVs opened up in turn, drawing the monster's attention away from the civilians.

The rounds had little effect, but they diverted the dragon's attention away from the village. Davis reached his vehicle, hopping up the side and tossing his kevlar helmet down into his station. He put on his CVC and commanded his section to roll out. The two vehicles opened fire, several rounds poking holes in the dragon's wings, but like bravo section, did little to no real damage.

"Fuck, I wish we had fuckin sabot rounds," Brown said over the intercom.

"Would they penetrate?" Davis asked.

"Hell yeah," Brown answered. "It's a damn sabot, just not tank-sized. But, like, fifty at a time."

"Just keep shooting, man!"

The massive dragon circled around the vehicles, choosing a target. It swooped low and opened its mouth. Before it could breathe onto the LAV, a tremendous explosion hit its side. The dragon bounced back and tumbled in the air before regaining control and looking towards the new target at the horizon.

Davis felt it rather than heard it. Over a thousand meters out, but he felt the compression on his inner ear as the boom from the M1A1 Abrams "Xolotl" reached his position. Davis looked over down the road and spotted two dust trails in the distance, one with a massive bloom of dust at its head.

"Arrow, this is One, get back to the village and dismount the corpsmen! The dragon hit a building! Over!"

With his command, his LAV and the other ferrying a corpsman sped back towards the small town. The other two had followed at a slower speed as a rear guard, keeping their weapons trained on the dragon. Eventually they got close to the buildings and dropped their ramps, the dismounts exiting with the corpsmen to assist them with the injured.

"Arrow Three One, this is Thunder Two Golf. Did I kill it?"

Davis brought the CVC mike to his mouth and pushed in the transmission button. "Thunder Two Golf, this is Arrow Three One. Negative, but you pissed it off."

"This is Thunder Two Golf, roger."

"This is Thunder One, firing HEAT."

A second later there was another explosion by the dragon, although much smaller. The damage seemed more significant, however, with a massive bloody wound opening into the dragon's side. It roared in pain, flying high into the air to escape its attackers.

"Thunder, this is Arrow Three One, what was that first round?"

"This is Thunder Two, that was MPAT airburst."

"This is Arrow Three One, roger."

By then the rest of the LAVs had reformed and gathered in a large box just outside of the village. The dismounts had left their vehicles and ran towards the village, into burning buildings to try and rescue the villagers caught inside. In the panic, many civilians were outside when the dragon struck and were caught directly by the flame. The Marines ignored them as they smoldered on the ground, instead breaking in doors and windows to reach the screaming, live ones inside.

Davis turned his attention back to the battle. The dragon was in a lazy circle high above the two tanks. It suddenly swooped downwards at them, and the two tanks reversed in reaction, going full speed, ignoring bumps, rocks, and other obstacles as they created distance between each other. The dragon reached the one named Xolotl, grabbing the hull with its massive, clawed foreleg. The tank hardly budged, however, and the momentum changed the flight path of the beast. The tank rocked back and forth on its treads for a few seconds before

settling back and reversing more, aligning the front of the hull with the dragon.

The dragon landed, facing the tank, opening its maw wide. "Shit," Davis said to himself.

The fire spewing from the dragon made a massive smoke cloud, obscuring the entire even from Davis. The dragon roared in triumph, a massive bellow Davis could hear even through the sound cushioning of his CVC. As the smoke cleared the dragon lowered its head to take in the sight of its new prey.

Only to get the view of an undamaged M256 gun staring at its face from ten meters away. A canister round was fired point blank, peppering the beast with its ball bearings and shredding off its right forearm entirely. The same side of its torso was bleeding profusely, blood pouring down and dripping off its limp leg.

The dragon took flight. Its ascent was shaky, pain obvious across its entire form, but it managed to take air faster than the tank could track it despite numerous small holes in its similarly damaged wing. It didn't get too far before another boom was heard, a pinprick of light streaking towards the flying beast, but it missed and zoomed off into the abyss of the deep forest.

"Jesus Christ."

The dragon disappeared in the dying light of the sky.

Davis dropped down into his hatch, slouching in his seat. From the destroyed village to the dragon fight, the day had been mentally exhausting. He rubbed his eyes, trying to dispel the weariness, but that only made him more exhausted. He stopped before he wanted to just sit there and sleep. After a quick stretch he popped his head out of the hatch to the sight of children swarming his men's vehicles. As the tanks got close to the LAVs to regroup, they had to slow down lest they risk running over any of the villagers.

"So how's it feel to be a hero?" Brown asked from his station. At Davis's blank look he continued, "In Afghanistan you'd give it a week. Then you drive by and you get blown the fuck up by an IED, boom you're in an L-ambush."

Davis continued to stare at him.

"Well, shit's probably different here anyway."

Davis turned back towards the commotion outside. The other LAVs had mostly kept to themselves, their TCs simply waving to the kids. The children themselves were incredibly excited, some even trying to climb onto the vehicles before their parents scolded or picked them off the sides. Others were crowding around the dismounted Marines, who were playing along with them, used to civilian contact from previous tours in the Middle East. The tankers, in contrast, were much more amicable than his platoon's crews, having climbed out of their turrets to talk with, give treats to, or otherwise interact with the villagers. Even one of the drivers had popped his hatch and was waving at them.

As he scanned the crowd one in particular stood out. She was wearing

a dark dress, trimmed in red, Victorian or something in style. She looked young, no older than twenty, but most obviously she carried a gigantic, ornately decorated axe. Perhaps he should have noticed that first, he told himself. She was standing proudly on the hull of Xolotl, seeming very interested in the man trying to speak with her. Eventually the tanker pointed towards Davis.

With a coy wave to the tanker, which was unenthusiastically returned, she hopped off the tank and strolled towards his own vehicle. Instead of climbing up like a normal person, she used her axe somewhat as a vaulting pole, gracefully landing on top of the turret in front of him, and brought the weapon back up into her grip as if it weighed nothing.

"Mind the step," he advised. She was trouble. He just knew it. He got a feeling, a pinprick in the back of his neck as he looked at her face.

"I am Rory, priestess of the God of Darkness, Emroy," she said, introducing herself with a small curtsy.

Snazzy title, Davis thought to himself. "Lieutenant Davis, First Light Armor Recon Battalion. Convenient you can speak English," he observed.

"Being a demi-goddess has its privileges," Rory stated.

He didn't know about being a demi-goddess, but from the way that the villagers around her looked at her, she was probably damn important. And considering the presence of magic and fantastical creatures, he wasn't going to outright dismiss it. Especially now that she spoke fluent English out of nowhere.

"So for what do I owe the pleasure of this... conversation?" he asked, eyeing her curiously. She certainly held herself like royalty, or however he thought royalty should hold itself at least. Proud, her free hand on her hip, a small grin at the corners of her mouth as she returned the appraising stare.

"Don't play dumb, Lieutenant Davis," she scolded. She looked over to the tanks, specifically at Xolotl, which had a massive gouge in its side skirt from the dragon's claws. "What is that magnificent mount of yours?"

"It's called a tank," he explained. "And it's a vehicle, like a carriage. Except it weighs a hundred forty thousand pounds and has a huge gun on it."

"Would you mind if I were to adopt them under my holy lord's name?" she asked. "They are surely worthy warriors for Him."

"One, they're not mine. They're just attached to my unit. Two, yes, they would mind." She was getting under his skin already for some reason.

She pouted, disappointment exaggerated in her voice. "Oh, you're no fun."

"I'm not here to have fun," he countered. "I'm here to, evidently, kill dragons."

"Yet you didn't."

"Bit closer than you were," he said.

She ignored the last comment, looking around at his men once more.
"May I go back with you?"

"Why should I say yes?" he asked. She was definitely up to something.

"To look around. If there's a new army invading the land of Emroy, I should see it with my own eyes."

"As a visitor," he said.

"As a visitor," she agreed. "May I?" she asked, gesturing towards his hatch.

"In the back," he said, no amusement in his voice. She looked towards the rear of his vehicle before he added, "Way back. We're taking the wounded with us. There's more room with them than in here."

That wasn't what she wanted, even he gathered that, but it was too late to back out.

One last thing, he remembered now that he had a break. He brought the CVC mic to his mouth. "Four, this is One. Did you call in the wounded to base? Over."

"One, Four, roger. They have medical personnel at the gate waiting for us, over."

"Four, One, thanks. Out."

* * *

><p>"Professional X-Ray, this is Arrow Three One. We are five mikes from base, four vics, two-eight pacs. Uncounted extras for priority casevac, over."<p>

"Arrow Three One, this is Professional X-Ray, roger, uh, is that casevac the one called in at time one-eight-three-one, over?"

"Professional X-Ray, Arrow Three One, yes. Burn victims, over."

"This is Professional X-Ray, roger, that is all."

"Professional X-Ray, Arrow Three One, out."

Step one complete, he thought to himself as he moved the CVC's mic back away from his mouth. The convoy roared down the road, as fast as the towed carriages could safely take. Alpha section, which included Davis's and Allen's LAVs, led the column, his own vehicle towing a carriage with half the injured and their families. Next were the tanks, their turrets rotated to opposite flanks, keeping watch for any enemies, grounded or airborne. Finally came Bravo section, the LAVs belonging to Sergeant Therough, who was also towing a carriage,

and Corporal Blumenthal, who brought up the rear of the formation.

There were only two extraneous passengers he allowed in his convoy: Rory, and a young blue-haired magician named Lelei. He had seen the damage done by magicians during the push onto Sloppy Joe Hill. Not only did she pick up English incredibly quickly, able to hold basic conversations after reading through his translation book a couple of times, but she could advise and assist the MEU regarding the magical threat a properly organized Imperial army represented. Her eager willingness to engage with the Marines only served to cement his faith in her intentions.

He hoped she could even serve to help bring an end to the war, if one could call it that, or one-sided slaughter, if the Marines decided to press it.

* * *

><p>"Who the hell are these people you brought in?"<p>

"They're injured refugees from the fight with the dragon, sir," Davis replied.

Captain Pelc shook his head, dreading the headache to come, while Major Leal stayed silent. Pelc shot Davis a 'This is your fault, dammit,' look at him while the major stared at the ground for a minute. After the short wait, he spoke.

"Pelc, you don't have to worry about this. This was bound to happen anyway. We have tents to spare to keep them and their families," he said. "This is turning into a permanent station anyway. Rest of the MEU is due to arrive as soon as the engineers finish setting up the housing and set up a basic fortification."

A man in the back of the room spoke up. It was Captain Tashjian, a short Armenian immigrant, the commander of one of Bulldog Company, the infantry company who initially stormed the hill along with Arrowhead Company and Thunder Platoon. "Pelc, what is the status of the refugees?"

"Mostly injured," Pelc answered. "Immediate family came along too, as well as person of high interest, that I've already discussed in the post-action."

"Are we a charity now?" Tashjian shot back.

"My lieutenant believed it the best choice at the time. He did not want to force the village to take care of people when they were already low on resources after the dragon burnt half their farms."

The two officers stared at each other for a few seconds, before Tashjian looked down into his mug and Pelc at the battalion commander.

"Sir, you said fortifications earlier?" Davis asked, breaking the silence. It wasn't particularly relevant, but it lightened the atmosphere a bit.

"Yeah," the major answered. "They attack like Romans, so we're setting up Roman-style fort walls. Ditches and pits, nothing crazy."

"Roger, sir," Davis replied. "Anything else?"

"For you, no," the major replied. "You can leave, actually."

Davis nodded politely and turned to leave the tent, discreetly grabbing a few packets of instant coffee and creamers.

* * *

><p>"Sir, we have a situation with one of the refugees," Captain Griffith, the battalion executive officer, informed him.<p>

"What is it, Griffith?" Major Leal asked, bringing his cup of coffee to his lips. That was one thing the piques did right, he thought to himself. Remember coffee in logpack, and plenty of it.

"To put it simply, one named Lelei or something wants to go collect scales from the dragon mount corpses and sell them in a nearby city."

"I- What?" He nearly spit out his coffee. Rather cliché, but it was so ridiculous that he nearly forgot he was drinking as he started talking.

"Hear me out, sir, I think it's a good idea," Griffith said defensively.

"How?"

"For one, it will spread word that we're powerful to the surrounding populace," Griffith explained. "We defeated two armies in a matter of a week and crippled a gigantic monster. Besides 'hearts and minds', this will help at the negotiating table. Two, information gathering. We can embed SOF inside the city to gather information and act how we see fit."

He took a deep breath. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as he initially thought. "You look like you wanted to add something."

"It's small, sir, but she could also work as a translator for us, and help us work with populaces. She's already near-fluent in English and is, and I have no authority on this, but seems like a very skilled magician for her age."

That third point piqued his interests. He wished Griffith would stop doing that. Just because he felt something wasn't important he tended to leave details as a sidenote.

"Tell me more," he said, "about Lelei. She's the one Pelc talked about, I believe." Not just _not_ a bad idea. Good idea, actually.

* * *

><p>Sloppy Joe Hill, as the men were calling it, a reference to the one-sided slaughter they inflicted upon the enemy forces, had grown to be quite comfortable over the past couple weeks, Sergeant Allen

had to admit. Permanent tents were being set up, the top of the hill flattened to make organization of the area easier. Generators were brought in to provide power, many of them wind and solar powered due to the restricted access to fuel. The Gate was only about as wide as a six lane road, severely limiting the ability for the US to project its power.<p>

He left the chow hall tent, which was rather bare by most structure standards, but the engineers had at least put up plywood flooring with two-by-four ribbing. The roadways, torn by tracks and tires alike, were likely to turn to deep mud at first rain, but for now were lasting. He walked by the command complex, a series of tents and hardstands surrounded by concrete T-barriers topped by barbed wire.

Humvees rolled by ferrying supplies, food, and water, while other Marines traveled on foot with their kit and weapons from their positions on the perimeter to their barracks, and back. Since the initial push the perimeter had expanded to make room for the entire reinforced battalion-sized force, meaning many more men on call and further walks, but it was preferred to sleeping in holes for days on end.

The past couple of weeks had been tense since the initial battle to take and secure Sloppy Joe Hill. Many young Marines had gotten the feeling that it was over, their armies defeated, but the more senior veterans knew how wrong that could be. Third platoon's mission the other day and the potentially catastrophic battle had been evidence enough of the fact that there was always something going on in the world, and that Marines would be there to kick _something's_ ass.

He had eventually found his company's tent, Arrowhead Company, First Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, which housed the three line platoons and command section. It was mostly full. Men from second and third platoons as well as headquarters were resting inside, "jack shacks" set up for those fortunate enough to have bottom bunks, while those on top simply read, slept, or played cards to pass the time. The crewmen and dismounts of first platoon were by their vehicles, the week being their turn for the Quick Reaction Force. The rest of the company were focused on preventative maintenance, but were otherwise unoccupied.

"The fuck you mean?" he heard one of the Marines say as he walked past. "If you fuck a dude, you're gay. There's no such thing as 'bi'."

"You're retarded. 'Bi' is when you fuck both guys and girls," a second replied.

"Why you so defensive? You gay or somethin'?" said the first.

"No, you fucking idiot. Look, that's like saying you're straight, even though you fuck dudes, because you also fuck girls."

He finally found his lieutenant, leaving the conversation behind him. Why did he always have to walk past at the weirdest moments?

"Hey, sir, you wanted me?"

"Yeah," Davis replied. "We _might_ have a mission again. Get your

guys' bags packed for a few days."

Allen's brow furled unconsciously. "What's this about?"

"One of the refugees, the blue-haired one with the magic stick. She wants to make a trip to some nearby city."

"We're babysitting civilians now?" Allen asked incredulously.

"One, might," Davis reaffirmed. "Two, it's more than that. Battalion wants a scouted route to a city."

"Ok, so how long are we talking?" It wasn't worth arguing over, Allen thought. Decisions are made regardless of his opinions.

"No more than a week, probably SP over, she does her shit, SP back."

"Rah, sir," Allen replied, and went to go find his crewmen and dismount NCO.

* * *

><p>"Two?" he asked.<p>

"Yeah, she keeps asking for two," the cook answered.

He stared at the to-go boxes in his hands, a couple bottles of water balanced precariously on the top. "Why do we keep giving her two? Isn't she just getting extra shit?"

"Nah, she only eats one of them. Just leaves the other one."

"So we're wasting food then."

"Pretty much," the cook answered. "But it usually gets eaten I guess by some hungry native after it gets thrown out, but even if not we don't put much food in the second one."

"Any idea why?"

The cook shrugged. "Said something about her dad, I think, but mistranslations and all that shit."

He sighed. The refugee girl had a broken leg, so it wasn't like she could go to the mess hall on her own, and it's not like the Marine on kitchen duty had anything better to do with his life, but it was still ridiculous that she's getting brought double rations just on request.

Whatever, he thought. Off to find this "Tooka" person.

* * *

><p>He caught Davis right outside the tent. A quick salute was rendered, which was deftly returned. "Davis, just to tell you, I don't think you were necessarily wrong," Tashjian said, surprising Davis.<p>

He had thought he pissed the captain off for that discussion to

happen right in front of the battalion commander. "Why's that, sir?"

"It was a good decision, just not the best one. But the important part, I think, is that you made a decision. Some people would fear pissing off their superiors," Tashjian explained. "But you decided doing the right thing, and helping people, was worth an ass-chewing."

"Well, uh," Davis muttered, stammering. "Thank you, sir."

He stared at the ground for a second, and at the canteen in his hand, the reason for him leaving the tent for the portable water tank. "So, what would you have done, sir?"

Captain Tashjian shrugged his shoulders. "Had corpsmen come out to us and set up an aid station for the whole village, I think. Show them that we give a shit about them and are willing to help," he explained. "What you did was take their dying friends and family and haul them off to some mysterious hill taken by an unstoppable enemy their government is at war with."

Davis nodded as the captain finished talking.

"Of course though," the captain began to reiterate, "I can't truly fault you for what you did."

"Yes, sir," replied Davis.

4. Interlude

Just a quick little thing concurrent with To Kill A Dragon

* * *

><p>Xolotl roared down the trail, dust kicking up behind in a massive plume. Or, rather, the M1A1 Abrams tank bearing his name. Following it was Thor. The two tanks were several miles from the perimeter of Sloppy Joe Hill, scanning the horizon for threats as they raced to a small village after being called in by the LAV reconnaissance platoon.<p>

It wasn't long before the gunner of Xolotl spotted the target a mile and a half away through his sight. A small dot at first, in the 3x magnification used for scanning, but when he switched to 10x the target was much clearer.

It certainly was a big, mean dragon.

"You think you can hit it from here?" the tank commander asked, peering through the commander's sight extension, viewing the same picture as the gunner.

"Probably." The gunner was only a Lance Corporal, but had proven himself expertly skilled in the past.

"Load up an MPAT," the TC ordered. "Air burst."

The loader hit the ammo door switch with his knee, making the door

open rather quickly, but too slowly for his nerves to like. He identified the correct round, which had a large "M" written in Sharpie on the aft cap, and smacked the release tab with his near hand. The large round slid out, his left hand catching it and controlling its path so he could access the nose-cone tip, turning it a few degrees to let it know it was hitting an air target.

He moved that hand back down just below the warhead, to the "neck", and guided it into the open breach of the main gun. He stepped back out of the way of the breach's path of recoil and raised the arming lever. "Up!" he yelled.

"Legolas this shit," the TC commanded.

"On the _fuckin'_ way!"

THUMP

The turret shielded most of the noise from the crew inside, the driver in fact hearing it the loudest, with just a poorly sealing, vibrating hatch separating him from the muzzle flare. The gunner heard nothing. Staring intently into his sight, he didn't even notice the movement of the breach, only knowing it fired because he saw the round travel downrange after he pressed the triggers. The loader caught a wave of compressed air, kicking up dirt and dust in his station. The usual rush of adrenaline, stemming from somewhere in his subconscious, hit him like a cold spot in a shower, giving him a tingle traveling down his spine to his toes.

To the TC, it was just another day.

"Arrow Three One, this is Thunder Two Golf. Did I kill it?" the gunner transmitted over the LAV platoon's company net.

"Thunder Two Golf this is Arrow Three One. Negative, but you pissed it off."

"This is Thunder Two Golf, roger."

"This is Thunder One, firing HEAT."

By then Thor had come aside Xolotl, an interval of about a hundred meters, and raised its gun towards the dragon. Like their own shot, it was a muted thump. The shockwave had passed in front of their tank, leaving a visible wake loose dirt, and the sound was blocked by both their tank and the padding of their CVCs. Although the TC's sight extension couldn't quite make it out, the gunner saw the round impact along the side of the dragon. It was a glancing hit, but the stream of molten material emanating from the HEAT round's explosion cut a deep gash along the beast's side, causing mass amounts of blood to spill as the flesh behind it cauterized.

"Thunder, this is Arrow Three One, what was that first round?"

"This is Thunder Two, that was MPAT airburst," the TC answered.

"This is Arrow Three One, roger."

The TC had opened his hatch, pulling out a pair of binoculars to view

the enemy monster as it turned its attention towards the tank section. It reoriented itself and flapped its massive wings, gaining momentum as it continued its path, steering itself towards the two tanks.

"Driver back up!" he yelled to his driver. "Ass right!"

Thor, to his left, had done similar, to the opposite. The tanks created distance between themselves, ignoring bumps and dips as they sped away at full speed. Whichever tank the beast went after, the wing tank would have the ability to help defend the other.

That was the plan, at least, before Thor took a sudden dip and disappeared from sight.

The dragon dived towards Xolotl, extending its tree trunk-sized forearms to grab at the tank. The TC, seeing this, braced, but nothing came of it. The dragon's claws failed to find purchase on the tank, slipping off of the depleted uranium-reinforced side skirts rather than digging in like it intended. The monster's entire trajectory changed, even, albeit by about fifteen degrees.

The gunner tried to engage, but as he engaged the hydraulics, a fountain of hot hydraulic splashed his legs.

"Oh God! It's on my balls!"

"What!?"

"Pump's leaking, no power!" the gunner replied.

Hydraulic pressure had gone out. The TC cursed to himself. "Driver back ass left!"

The tank obeyed its driver's commands, at least, rearing back at an angle until the driver had seen the gun tube, barely visible at the top of his periscope, pointed at the dragon.

The TC took in the sight of the dragon, grounded, its maw wide and just above ground level. He watched as its chest heaved, drawing in breath, before he caught onto its intentions. He immediately dropped to his seat, bringing the hatch down with him. "Gun up! Gun fuckin' down! Close your doghouse! Loader's hatch!"

The gunner obeyed immediately, turning the manual elevation handle with his left hand, his right working on the metallic shields that guarded the gunner's primary sight. Just in time, as what felt like rain splashed against the front of the hull and turret as the dragon let loose its most dangerous weapon. The hatch was difficult to lock, leaving the TC to use all his weight to hold it down as the locking handle only found partial purpose. He saw, with relief, as the loader braced himself against his guards, the hatch closed tight above him.

The onslaught ended after seconds, although to the crew it felt like minutes.

"Gunner, manual back up." He turned to the man next to him, staring him in the eyes with anger to the beast that dared fire at him, at his crew, and at his tank. "Can."

A sadistic grin filled the loader's face underneath his fire-resistant balaclava. He opened the ammo door and searched for a second before releasing a large, front-heavy round with "C" Sharpie'd onto the aft cap. He slid it in quickly despite its awkward balance, arming the gun once the ammo door had sealed itself back shut.

He tried to look through the periscopes surrounding his hatch, but the forward ones had melted partially from the heat, obscuring his vision too much to see clearly.

"Once you have a shot, man," he said, "kill that bitch."

He looked through the sight extension again, and thankfully the gunner's auxiliary sight was untouched. Like he hoped, the gun mantle had protected it from the flames. As the smoke cleared, he saw that the beast had not moved from its spot. It wanted to see the corpse of its prey, he guessed.

"Stupid bitch didn't move," muttered the gunner. "On the way."

THUMP

The dragon had flinched at the last second, he saw, as it realized its target was not a pile of ash and bone like most of its victims. Only half of the tungsten ball bearings had hit, but it was more than enough to seemingly vaporize the dragon's forearm, reducing it to hanging shreds of sinew and flesh. It roared in pain, turning to protect its wound with its armored hide, but the loader already had the next round in his hands. Another canister.

Unfortunately for Xolotl, the beast had suddenly lifted from the air before it could strike again. Thor attacked again, but the round missed by feet, giving the dragon room to flee for its life. All the TC could do at that point was to open his hatch and cuss at the thing, which he did, profusely.

"Two, this is One. Sorry about the wait. Hit a ditch."

"One, Two. Yeah I saw," the TC answered. "Saw you miss that last shot too."

"Whatever, let's just get back with those LAVs."

On that command, the two tanks turned themselves towards the village, creeping towards the reconnaissance platoon and the very rowdy crowd of civilians.

End
file.